

# The Hand of the Market & the Boot of the Army

CIHAN TUĞAL

The emergence of a new actor, the Justice and Development Party (AKP), upset the balance of forces in Turkey at the turn of the millennium. In the last two decades of the twentieth century, the main opposition was organized by the Welfare Party (RP), which ran on a platform of social justice, anti-Westernism, and Islamic morality. After the secularist military closed this party down twice, a new generation of leaders split to form the AKP. They received a warm welcome from liberals, business circles, and the West, to whom they promised market reforms and democratization.

## Neo-liberal democratization

The rigid secularist bureaucrats and middle classes remained incredulous; they feared a gradual transformation to an Islamic regime when the AKP came to power in 2002 with the support of the business class, the media, religious communities, the USA, and the EU. Yet, four and a half years of AKP rule were marked by extensive privatization and limited democratization, rather than Islamization. The Turkish economy grew steadily, while inequalities rose sharply. The ruling party emphasized democratization, but tended to restrict this with the needs of the market.

Between 2002 and 2006, torture declined. The government granted the Kurds the right to receive private education in their own language. Turkey's ratings in human rights indices improved. These steps, along with economic reforms, sent the global business world the image of a liberalizing country. Foreign capital flowed in. However, the government took no concrete steps to integrate the Kurds into the system. The 10% election barrier, which kept Kurdish nationalist parties out of the parliament for years, is still in force. The major legal Kurdish organization (Democratic Society Party, DTP) received severe blows in the first months of 2007. During the same year, the government itself made attempts to overturn some reforms concerning the Kurds, under pressure from the Army. The AKP cooperated with the secularist CHP (Republican People's Party) to erect yet other institutional impediments in the way of a DTP success at the polls in 2007.

More important for the markets, the AKP government crushed strikes and Prime Minister Erdoğan labelled any popular resistance against privatization as "communist." On May Day 2007, the Istanbul Governor and the police heavily cracked down on demonstrators. *Zaman*, the newspaper of a pro-AKP religious community, even called for military action against the non-violent demonstrators.

Finally, the willingness of the top AKP leaders to participate in Western military action against Middle East countries, despite strong public opinion, bolstered the image of the government as pro-Western,<sup>1</sup> thereby making the country even more attractive for Western transnational capital. At the same time, transactions with Muslim countries also increased, as the ruling party converted its Islamist past into new business ties. In sum, the AKP government pursued democratization and Islam in so far as they served the country's integration with world markets.

In the absence of democratic mass forces, all the social ills that neo-liberal democratization fostered led to the public questioning of democracy rather than a criticism of neo-liberalization. The resulting trend of authoritarianism was also due to disappointment with EU accession. In the last several years, the AKP enacted major democratic reforms also as a part of the EU accession process. European reluctance regarding Turkish membership despite the reforms increased the number

**Turkey is going through hard times. The bastion of secularism in the Middle East is forced to make a choice between the hand of the market and the boot of the army. The AKP's conservatives gain momentum by building Islamic and liberal consent for the market option. The opposition, aligned behind the army and nationalist parties, lacks a clear economic alternative, while it mobilizes around anti-market and anti-Islamist slogans. The electorate heavily weighed on the side of the market in July 2007. Yet, the military and its allies still threaten to destabilize the AKP's neo-liberal democratization.**

of anti-EU nationalists in the country. The nationalists perceive especially the Kurdish reforms as intended to first weaken, and then to partition Turkey, in line with alleged European and American desires.

## Nationalist mobilization

In April 2007, Turkey witnessed its history's biggest rallies. Hundreds of thousands gathered in many major cities against the possibility that the next Turkish president could have a veiled wife. Izmir, the pinnacle, boasted a total of one million demonstrators. Yet,

the veil was not the only item on the agenda of the secularist organizers. Actually, the government had taken only timid steps towards increasing the role of Islam. Together with this concern about moderate Islamization, the rallies also raised issues about the government's pro-market and democratic reforms. The Atatürkist Thought Association (ADD), one of the two primary organizers of the events, emphasized its stance against the "global exploitation system" and Turkey's increasing foreign debt in its call for the event. Despite this apparent social justice orientation of the organizers, Turkey's major unions did not support the rallies, publicly announcing that they would not be on the same side with "coup-mongers."

As the union leaders hinted, the ADD is a part of a network of civil society organizations and political parties which have been resisting democratic reforms. This network includes the CHP as well as smaller secularist parties, associations of nationalist professionals, and some paramilitary nationalist groups. All of these organizations are worried about pro-Kurdish reforms of the government, its dialogue with Armenians, its liberal policies regarding Cyprus, its privatization of natural resources and strategic public companies, and what they perceive to be the increasing salience of Islam in Turkey. Some of them have called for more military involvement in the regime. The Turkish press has uncovered evidence about the nationalist paramilitary organizations' involvement in several assassinations, including the slaying of the Armenian journalist Hrant Dink.

Dink's killing was a link in a series of nationalist murders in 2006 and 2007, which targeted intellectuals, activists, and missionaries seen as agents of the West. This ferocious campaign, coupled with the rallies, raised concern among Turkish intellectuals regarding the possibility of a fascist regime. Indeed, as several analysts pointed out, the parallels with historical fascist mobilization are striking. The nationalist organizations tap into a popular feeling of national humiliation at the hands of the European Union, just like interwar fascisms erupted after military and diplomatic defeats. They are fiercely against the government's "concessions" to minorities. They voice the fears of some middle class sectors and soldiers who find themselves jammed between global capitalism on the one hand, and Kurdish and Islamic movements on the other. Fascisms of yesteryear similarly gave voice to the middle classes squeezed between big business and militant working class movements. Similar to classical fascism, the new nationalism in Turkey combines social justice rhetoric with nationalist authoritarianism. Maybe more important than anything else, the nationalist organizations are all fired up over the possibility of an independent Kurdish state, and want the military to intervene in Northern Iraq, using Lebensraum-like arguments. Just like in interwar Europe, the main leaders of these paramilitary organizations are retired soldiers. Finally, as in interwar Italy, many of the top leaders are also converts from the socialist left. These ex-socialists are dismayed with the democratization and internationali-

zation of the Turkish left. The new nationalists fight these “aberrations” by building purified organizations to which non-Turks are not allowed.

However, all of this does not mean that a fascist takeover is imminent. There is currently no Duce who can turn this loose network of nationalist organizations into a single fascist party. Attempts to forge a grand coalition of secular nationalists (the Kemalists) and more religiously oriented extreme nationalists (the Grey Wolves of the Nationalist Action Party, MHP) have so far failed. The Kemalist perception of the Grey Wolves as religious fanatics prone to senseless murder prevents any smooth coalition of all nationalist forces. This perception emanates both from Kemalists’ secular elitism and from the grey wolves’ murder record in the 1970s. Moreover, what combined millions in the rallies was by no means a clearly defined racist ideology, even though the paramilitary groups have been circulating racist documents for a while. Finally, as different from interwar fascisms that had a clear corporatist alternative to liberal capitalism and socialism, the nationalists of Turkey have no well-defined economic programme beyond an anti-neoliberal rhetoric. Hence, there is (as of yet) no united political will that can thoroughly transform Turkey in a fascist direction.

What seems more possible is a decisive shift in the direction of an authoritarian regime. In that regard, the mobilization succeeded only partially. Ever since mid-April, the military has been intervening in politics via ultimatums, both supporting and being supported by the nationalist street. Taking its lead from the rallies and a military ultimatum, the Constitutional Court cancelled presidential elections. The nationalists thereby initially succeeded in blocking a veiled, neo-liberal presidency.

## Two campaigns: chauvinism and demilitarization

Both the neo-liberals and the nationalists centred on the July elections to resolve the presidential crisis. The election campaigns shaped up as a competition between extreme nationalism and democratization (bounded by neo-liberalism). While the only major representative of the second option was the AKP, the CHP, the MHP, and the Young Party (GP) competed for nationalist votes. Along with anti-Islamism and anti-liberalism, the nationalist parties built their platform on the widespread worry that the federal structure of Iraq is not sustainable. Northern Iraq would inevitably become an independent Kurdish state, they believed. An independent Kurdistan, in turn, would lead to the demise of the Turkish Republic, as the Kurds in Turkey would eventually split and join their brethren in the south.

The military chief Büyükanıt publicly asked the government to send the military into Iraq, both to stop attacks by the Kurdish guerrilla positioned in Northern Iraq and to prevent the formation of an independent Kurdish State. The AKP responded by announcing that it did not receive any official request from the military. The major nationalist parties and media channels held the government responsible for dragging its feet regarding an operation. In the weeks before the elections, the visual media and the press drummed up public support for operations in roundabout ways. One example was the unusual airtime devoted to funeral ceremonies of soldiers killed by the guerrilla. The top generals as well as AKP ministers joined these funerals, along with thousands of people. Nationalist crowds chanted in favour of the generals and booed the ministers.

In this atmosphere, it would be difficult for any political party to protect the democratic reforms, let alone pass new ones. The AKP itself gave in to pressures by reversing some of the reforms (e.g. by expanding police capacities against “terrorism”). Today, torture is again on the rise in Turkey. Counter-insurgency in the southeast already has a lot of street support behind it, and the army has been asking for more. In early June 2007, Büyükanıt demanded mass reactions “against terrorism.”

Nevertheless, the AKP’s hands were not tied in the face of this campaign. While avoiding any public confrontation with the military, the ruling party indirectly undermined the military’s authority. Closer to the elections, the conservative police forces started to uncover more

and more links of the military with political murders and paramilitary organizations. Also, pro-AKP sources revealed that the Turkish military was consulting with neo-con think tanks in the U.S., discussing bloody conspiracies to thwart the AKP government. After these dark dealings of the military were made public, the nationalist mobilization lost momentum. The June rallies that the generals had incited could gather only a few thousand people. In the meantime, the liberal think tanks in the U.S. started to openly support the AKP. The party also gave a positive message to Washington by liquidating the (ex-Islamist) members of parliament who had voted against letting the Americans use Turkey’s borders for attacking Iraq.

## Self-defeating anti-imperialism

After the invasion of Iraq, there was a sharp anti-American turn in public opinion in Turkey. The nationalist parties used this public sentiment as a weapon against the AKP, and after 2003 politics shaped around taking the right position with respect to the U.S. Yet, the real issue in Turkey is not a choice between pro-Americanism or anti-Americanism, as recent developments demonstrated. Different wings of the Turkish ruling bloc have been negotiating with different wings of the American elite, whether overtly or covertly. The Army itself appeared anti-American and thus appealed to street-level anti-imperialism, while working with the U.S. In this contradictory atmosphere, more anti-imperialism led to more American control. For the first time in Turkish history, the battles between American think tanks were in the centre of Turkish politics and public debate. The new wave of nationalism was strengthening the imperialism it claimed to be fighting against.

The secularists’ shallow anti-imperialism eventually backfired: as a reaction against the authoritarianism of the secularists, a wide array of forces (liberals, Islamists, conservatives) united their forces at the ballot on July 22. The AKP increased its votes from 34% to 46% in four and a half years. More interestingly, the AKP nearly doubled its votes in the Kurdish southeast despite its sluggish human rights record. About half of the Kurdish population gave the message that it counts on the pro-American (and potentially pro-Barzani) foreign policies of the party rather than on the guerrilla-supported DTP’s secular nationalism.

EU representatives, the Western financial press, and Western governments enthusiastically applauded the victory. But so did Middle Eastern governments and Islamist newspapers worldwide. When the AKP’s foreign minister Abdullah Gül officially declared on August 13 that he was still the party’s presidential candidate, both European and Turkish liberals, and local Islamists were jubilant; the former interpreted this step as a guarantee that Turkey would stick to democratic reforms, while the latter saw this as an augury of coming Islamization. The success of the AKP lies in being able to cash such combined democratic and Islamic support into market reforms. For example, immediately after its election victory, the party signalled that it is going to change the constitution to allow the privatization of lakes and rivers.

However, the game is not over yet. Kurdish nationalist politicians entered the July elections as independent candidates to overcome the 10 per cent barrier. Now, there is a strong DTP contingent in the parliament. The military and its allies are likely to use Kurdish nationalism, the yet unresolved presidential crisis, and the spectre of Islamization as excuses to take anti-democratic steps. Given Turkey’s present political cartography, there is no concrete alternative against neo-liberalism, but authoritarian actors still have the power to destabilize market reforms.

## Note

1. See also Cihan Tuğal, “NATO’s Islamists: Hegemony and Americanization,” *New Left Review* 44 (2007): 5–34.

Cihan Tuğal is Assistant Professor at the University of California, Berkeley.  
Email: ctugal@berkeley.edu